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Ceremonies for the Expulsion of Illnesses among the Mataco

[Les Cérémonies d'Expulsion des Maladies chez les Matako]

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[Title page]

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755 [114] In the course of the mission to the Argentinian Chaco of which I was in charge during 1932-1933, I had the opportunity of being present at a certain number of ceremonies for the expulsion of illnesses, or evil spirits.

[753] [774] The Matako /Mataco/ Indians do not seem to be acquainted with any other medicine than magical medicine; that is normal since the illness takes the image of the sick person and not his body.

Among the ceremonies described below, a distinction can be made between those from which the whole village benefits and those from which only a single sick person benefits.

Ceremony for the Expulsion of Illnesses for All the Village

(April 8, 1933).

755 756 783 796 [534] [242] [237] [302] This ceremony took place in the morning in the open air rather far from the houses, and was carried out by all the medicine men /the English term is used/ of the village. They were arranged in a row facing east, and all had a maraca and a bone whistle in their hands. Some of them were carrying bands of rattles, either in the hand, slung over the shoulder, or hooked over the elbows. Some officiants were dressed in red wool ceremonial shirts spangled with rings of shells, and others in war shirts made of caraguata thread. Almost all were wearing red headbands decorated with feathers or hats adorned with ostrich feathers, and most had a bunch of ostrich feathers in the hand. The faces of the principal medicine men were daubed with red and black, and those of the women with red. Facing the row of officiants were planted several arrows, points down, and a lance with the point up. In the course of the ceremony a bunch of ostrich feathers was attached to the top of the lance. When I arrived at the spot, I noticed a young /212/ man crushing ha'tax seeds in a gourd which the medicine men would take later.

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755 The ceremony consisted of a song without words, identical
756 to the one the medicine men make heard during the treatment
783 of illnesses. The singing was given rhythm by the rattling of
786 the maracas, and, from time to time, by the sound of the bands of rattles and hoofs and blasts of the whistles. Each whistle blast marks a new stage in the performances connected with the ceremony (new metamorphosis of the spirit of the medicine man, as well as his arrival or departure from a given place). The maraca was sometimes held in a threatening manner as if to repulse an invisible being; the same gesture was made by those who held ostrich feathers. In turn, without interrupting the ceremony, one or another of the officiants took the ha'tax powder. One of the officiants ran behind and in front of his colleagues, dusting them from head to toe with a feather in his hand; he was assisted by another man, who made the rattles and little bells on their backs jingle. After having taken some ha'tax the officiants began to sing again, to brandish their maracas, and to make threatening gestures with them or with the feathers. Some medicine men were singing the song appropriate for their spirits, without concerning themselves with the recitative chants of their confreres.

The direct offensive against the illness followed these preliminaries: some individuals stopped out of the row, brandishing their maracas and feathers violently, and then returned to their places. Another began to throw up some dirt with his foot and was immediately followed by another who, seizing handfuls of dust, threw it in front of himself. Then one of them unsheathed his liana-cutter and began to cut the grass around him; his example was followed by almost the entire group, which threw itself into the assault on the illness. Some obstinately set upon one spot, as if they had at last driven the enemy into a corner, and beat it with redoubled blows of their liana-cutters or feather brooms, and then stamped on it as though they were burying their victim. The attack on the illness lasted rather long and was executed with great seriousness.

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755 756 743 746 The follow-up to the ceremony was what we could call a general disinfection. The medicine men began by dusting each other off, making their rattles jingle right against the bodies of their colleagues, and blowing on the tops of their heads or the napes of their necks, as is done for illness. Then all the men, women, and children who had attended the ceremony as spectators were summoned. They sat down and the medicine men and medicine women /given in English/ came to pass their feather brooms over their bodies, to blow on their heads, and to make the rattles jingle along their bodies. These rites were carried out just as scrupulously for the children as for the adults.

/213/ My friend Sanchez was the object of particular pains; after the chief medicine man in person had blown over him, he was assisted by four medicine men, two of whom blew and sang over him, while the other two shook rattles, bells, and maracas.

Those of the medicine men who were not occupied with the disinfecting turned halfway around and repeated all the gestures which they had previously carried out. From time to time one or another again left the row to mow down the grass and furiously engulf the illness. The whistles succeeded each another at intervals which were ever closer together, and the rattles were shaken with more energy and insistence.

The ceremony was over when all the members of the community were considered relieved of the evil influences with which they had been impregnated.

Notes

[164 231] 1. The illness to be expelled was hoof-and-mouth disease, with which the livestock was then stricken, and which had had unfortunate consequences on the health of the people. Several who had eaten contaminated meat had fallen ill.

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755 2. The medicine men had transformed their "image"
756 (spirit) into isti'n, a bird of prey, in order to go find the illness,
774 but as on this occasion the latter had proved particularly
825 malicious, this first attempt at conciliation had failed, and the men had to transform themselves into mɨsa', earth bees.

Ceremony for the Expulsion of Illness for the Benefit of One Person

(January 24, 1933)

755 In a small neighboring village a man was caught by naLi'le. Toward midnight he was dressed in red and white and
[292] seated in the center of the place for ceremonies; he was given two bells. Facing the sick man three sticks were stuck in the ground; one of them about two meters long was entirely covered with a dark cloth; the other two were 75 to 85 cm. long and had pieces of cloth attached to their upper part, which was topped with tufts of ostrich feathers. The two medicine men, dressed only in belts of ostrich feathers and holding iron rattles in their hands, were at the sick man's side. A little farther away were two assistants (probably members of the sick man's family) and three dancers; all were holding rattles.

[533] The medicine men sang and blew on the sick man, who shook his bells, while the dancers and the assistants stamped in
[535] place, /214/ making their rattles sound. The dancers next began to run around the group in the following manner: they went from left to right while turning their backs to the sticks; arriving level with the latter for the second time, they changed direction and continued in this fashion, alternately making two circles in each direction, while the assistants beat time with their feet and sang, making their rattles jingle, and the medicine men continued to sing and blow. The sick man had remained motionless during this time. After about ten circlings, the dancers

/214 cont./

755 went to rest, smoking and talking with the assistants, but the medicine men did not stop singing and shaking their rattles, the sick man continuing to remain motionless. The dancing was [533] [535] resumed after a quarter of an hour, accompanied this time by the rattles and singing of all the officiants and by the sick person's bells. The participants had a fairly joyful air. The ceremony ended everyone sat down and began to smoke. Then they carried away the sticks and began to take off the ornaments, first those of the medicine men, then those of the assistants and dancers, and lastly those of the sick man, who went quietly to his hut.

Note

[774] [776] naLi'le is a spirit who lives underground and steals the images of men. Sometimes those whom it has taken thus become medicine men.

Ceremony for the Expulsion of Illness
for the Benefit of One Person

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(March 20-24, 1933)

A woman who was seriously ill and very rich was treated by five great medicine men of the region.

[349] In the area around the house where she lived, about five square meters of ground were cleared, wooden posts were erected there, and a kind of tent was erected; one of the posts, of about six meters, was decorated with two large pieces of cloth and an old Argentinian flag. Around the tent were placed the objects demanded by the illness or appropriate to please it: a spread-out mosquito net, a poncho on a weaving loom, an old suitcase, some cloths of loud colors, a saddle, a military coat,

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755 554 a storm lamp, a lance, and a gun. A little farther away fires were prepared for cooking foods destined for the illness and a bucket of water for the dancers. The sick woman was seated in the middle of the tent on a bale of hay and some old cloths, dressed in her best clothes and covered with ritual ornaments. [292] [301] [302] The five medicine men were also adorned; they were wearing feather belts, rattles, colonial helmets, /215/ and other precious objects; the entire lower part of their faces was daubed with black. There were also about 20 dancers, dressed up in 755 554 535 feathers, red belts decorated with shells, rattles, caps, red cloths, whistles, and old broken watches; about 10 old women were running around with pieces of cloth in their hands, and one of them with an umbrella. Everyone, including the sick woman, danced and sang; sometimes the medicine men and the sick woman stopped, and the medicine men blew on her; then the dance was resumed. After some time the chief medicine man blew on his bone flute and the dance stopped outright. The sick woman danced by herself, slowly lifting one foot, then the other, three or four centimeters above the ground, and staying in one place; during this time, two medicine men were shaking their rattles, a man was tapping in his hands, laughing, and another was shaking two flat, tin bottles — in which powder is sold in the interior of Argentina — filled with seeds; this lasted about ten minutes, and then the medicine 755 554 men joined in the dance, but only for a short time. After a stop two of them approached the sick woman and began to take off her things; during this time a medicine man was shaking his rattles along the woman's body, beginning with the head. Slowly all the ornaments were taken off, the assistants tapped the ground on the spot where they had fallen, then, running, they went to throw them outside; having gathered them together they shook them several times, and then carefully arranged them. The sick woman was seated in the middle of the tent and given something to drink. The ceremony was interrupted and then continued.

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755 The whole ceremony lasted from March 20 to March 24,
554 every day from 8 A.M. to 2 P.M. and from 8 to 10 P.M.
Each day at the end of the ceremony a shot was fired to frighten the illness.

Ceremony for the Expulsion of Illness for the Benefit of One Person

(March 26, 1933)

755 On March 26 another woman who had the same symptoms of illness as the preceding one was treated in the following manner: the site already described was used, but the flag was replaced by a large piece of red cloth with blue flowers, and a thick tuft of ostrich feathers was attached to the top of the post. The staff was decorated with ritual belts. Offerings of the same type as those for the preceding ceremony were placed on the crossbars which separated the tent from the village.
755 During the entire ceremony the sick woman remained seated
535 /216/ on a bale of hay in the center of the tent; right next to her were four of the great medicine men, a little farther away about ten young dancers, and then a final circle of six or seven women. All the officiants, adorned as usual with feathers, ritual belts, and little bells, danced and sang. A passage was
[123] contrived in the separating crossbars, and, as I insisted on it, a medicine man came to tell me that this opening was intended to let the illness out; I asked him if my presence would prevent it from going out; he told me no, but that I was running the risk that it would enter me at the moment it left the body of the sick woman.

The dance was halted at a sign from the chief medicine man, and two men, taking a poncho, striped red and white, by its ends, began to dance, jumping sideways, legs open; then

/216 cont./

[755 535] they approached the sick woman and passed the poncho over her head; next they ran to the exit and shook it. They repeated this maneuver several times, then completely enveloped the woman in the poncho, and a medicine man began to rub her through the cloth. Everyone was singing but some were not dancing. After some time the poncho was taken off, carried at a running pace to the exit, and thrown outside. The dance was resumed; an assistant threw some water on the ground, and the chief medicine man then stopped the dance again. He sat next to the sick woman, covering himself completely with a large black blanket, and began to speak with the illness; during this time the man who was watering the ground carried up a bucket of water and, with the help of a medicine man, washed the face, head, and body of the sick woman, who was turned with her feet toward the passage made in the crossbars, and a path was traced with water from her feet to the passage. The chief medicine man got up and the dance was resumed with renewed ardor. During this dance the assistant moistened the shoulders [302] of the male dancers, while an old man painted the faces of the women red, giving them two circles on the cheek bones and a streak along the nose. At the same time one medicine man blew on the sick woman and another covered her face with a red cloth. At the end of a certain time the sick woman lay down, the dance continued, taking on a threatening character, and then suddenly the people appeared satisfied, having undoubtedly obtained a momentary success. The ceremony stopped and was resumed after an hour.

Note

[164 132] According to the medicine men with whom I had a chance to talk about these two sick women, they were suffering from "sickness in the chest," /217/ easily explicable by a sharp atmospheric drop of almost 25° in 24 hours.

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Ceremony for the Expulsion of Illness for the Benefit of One Person

(April 2, 1933)

755 [554] A woman being sick, she was taken care of, but as she was less rich, the ceremony had a more modest character. Opposite the sick woman's house they put up a tent under which she lay down. The offerings were only some cloths and string bags. At my arrival the medicine man was in the act of speaking with the illness, while an old woman, also a medicine woman, was singing and blowing on the sick woman. The others were talking among themselves, without appearing to be very concerned with what was going on. After an interruption, during which [213] everyone drank the wine demanded by the illness, a man began to run around the sick woman, singing, his body bent forward and his arms dangling. The chief medicine man continued to speak with the illness, while the woman blew on the sick woman and another medicine man put a certain number of covers from illustrated newspapers and 20-centavo popular novels around her head. The runner stopped and the chief medicine man began to talk with the others. Everyone sat down, drinking water, and two women began to walk rapidly around the others, singing. One of them stopped, and a little later the other did 755 the same. Then all the assistants began to dance, accompanied 763 by hiccups from the sick woman, who appeared to be getting worse and worse; in fact she died in the middle of the ceremony.

Immediately after the death the dance was stopped; the old women ran around the tent, shaking maracas and singing, while two men laid the dead woman on her right side, bending her legs and crossing (or bending) her arms over her breast. She was wrapped in the cloths on which she had been lying and [152] carried to her house. The medicine men stripped themselves [756] quietly while all the women of the village wailed the customary lamentations.

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Notes

753 755 843 1. This woman, who was about seven months pregnant, continued to carry enormous loads of dry wood, which provoked the illness to which she succumbed.

[761] 2. According to the opinion of the village, the death was due to the fact that she had become pregnant before her first child knew how to feed itself.

Plate VIII

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A. The medicine men sing to the rhythm of the maracas.

B. Threats by the medicine men; a whistle announcing a transformation.

[End Plate 1]

Plate IX

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[415]

A. Dance around a sick woman.

B. Dance around a sick woman.

[End Plate 2]